

2005 State of the City – February 3, 2005

Welcome City Council President DerGurahian, Council members, and distinguished guests. After 13 months in office, my ability to offer up a complete State of the City Address is much stronger than it was in 2004. For more than a year, coming to this building each and every day has been a joy, and I want to begin tonight by once again thanking the residents of Troy for electing me to this great position.

One year ago I stood here and expressed enthusiasm for what my entire administration was about to embark on. It seems odd to say that one can grow extensively in so little time, but the lessons we have learned in this short period have advanced into the basis for the future of the City of Troy.

Tonight I offer up to you two messages- one of hope and one of vision. The first is a message that in its simplest form should be a rallying cry for Trojans everywhere. It is a message of strength and confidence. While some may think it is aggressive, I believe that standing up and fighting for what you believe in is an honorable act. The message: The City of Troy will no longer be taken advantage of.

It may sound simple, or even ridiculous to some, but I give you my word that I am quite sincere. I feel that the current state of Troy is positive, and that we are on a great roll. But I also believe the possibilities ahead surpass not only our current state, but our wildest imaginations as well.

If I could, I will begin tonight with a look back at our first year in office. It seems amazing to me how many times I have told the story, but the first real concern we had to address was a fire in Lansingburgh on a cold January night. As strange as it may appear, that three-alarm blaze set the tone for the entire year. The fire department battled frigid temperatures and scorching flames. I will never forget the icicles hanging off their faces. I will never forget the commitment those men showed to the residents of Troy that night.

At the same fire, the police department secured the scene, keeping people under control. Department of Public Works employees blocked the streets, directed traffic, and pitched in anywhere they could. There was the Department of Public Utilities shoveling ice so that the sewers remained open. And we saw Code Enforcement working well after midnight.

Early last year we discussed a new aggression that would need to be put into place to fight the problems that had become a menace to residents during the last decade. The demolition of the row houses on 119th Street just days after that fire exemplified what would happen in the coming year. Those houses were a danger to the neighborhood, and an eyesore for the entire City. In years past they would have been allowed to sit and decay. Not anymore. We cannot let fire ravaged and derelict buildings stand in the way of our strengthening neighborhoods.

Last year it was that fire, and the actions of several smaller, yet significant events, that saw the birth of The Action Team. A number of Action Team members are here tonight bearing the blinding Action Team colors. Before we go one step further, I ask for enthusiastic round of applause for these great employees and all the hard work they did in 2004.

Whether it was the countless tons of trash removed from streets and alleys, or the 300 abandoned cars towed away, or a sparkling downtown central business district, or the leadership of Department of Public Works Commissioner Bob Mirch, the work of the Action Team has resulted in the cleanest streets Troy has seen in a number of years.

Never underestimate the importance of a clean city. When was the last time you could drive through certain sections of Troy and see people sweeping their sidewalks, cleaning their yards, and taking pride in their neighborhoods? That has been missing for a long time. It is making a wonderful and significant comeback.

When residents see that the city workforce is energized and dedicated to cleaning up the city - they respond, they pitch in and help clean up their surroundings. Neighbors begin to notice and they follow suit, house by house, block-by-block- we will take back this city.

Often overlooked, but never forgotten are the hardworking members of the Department of Public Utilities, who have been quite busy recently. As these crews fought busting water mains during the frigid month of January, it became clear that these men were in need of tools to help them do their job even better. With that in mind, I am pleased to announce tonight that we have authorized the purchase of new technology that will help the City take a proactive stance against these occurrences in the future.

There is not a day that goes by that someone does not approach me and praise the condition of the streets in Troy. To me, that signals success that the first step in improving the perception of Troy is working. That perception- that Troy is not a clean and safe City- is troubling to me, it always has been. Together we are changing that.

And in 2004 we began to seriously address the issue of crime in Troy. As we like to point out, we do not want to simply claim our streets are cleaner and safer, we want to prove it. I always said as a Councilman, in order to fix a problem you must first acknowledge you have one.

With the support of the City Council, we passed several measures that focused on problem areas throughout the City. The first law we passed was to put a curfew on children and teenagers within 1,000 feet of school property. This effort was made to curb the gathering of students before, during and after school hours. Now when our children go to school they do not have to be tempted to join their peers across the street to try their first cigarette or skip class.

Community Police members had inquired about this measure for years, and this council made it priority and had it passed within a month. I commend the city council for that decisive action.

Later in the year, the council listened to concerns about another proposal that sought to shutdown convenience stores from midnight to 5 a.m. There was much apprehension about this proposal from storeowners who said the law would be detrimental to their business. I applaud the council for understanding that the hours these stores were keeping, and the element each attracted, was the real detrimental effect. And while there was much talk about the law before it was passed, not only has there been silence since, but also the effect of the change has been far reaching.

Downtown streets are quieter, neighbors are happier, and as expected, there are not many people missing that loaf of bread at 3 a.m.

Finally, the City Council passed one more piece of legislation purchasing the South Troy substation, a message that spoke volumes for our commitment to Community Policing now and in the future.

I thank the Council for taking the right steps to increase the safety and quality of life of our residents.

Equipped with new legislation, a renewed energy, and exciting programs, our police department focused on improving the quality of life that so many residents have complained about for years. Street level crime leads to larger incidents, and it is that street level crime we concentrated on. Our arrests in 2004 were higher than in previous years. Despite appearing as if crime is up, it is a number I am happy to report. It is a number that proves we are on our way to cleaning up the streets of more than just debris.

With focused attention on drug and prostitution crackdowns using grant programs such as Operation IMPACT, Gang and Violent Crime Suppression, and Weed and Seed, in 2004, the Troy Police Department began practicing a new philosophy to combat crime. The adjusted strategy made note of the number of citizen complaints concerning quality of life violations and street level crimes, and began to move away from targeting upper-level, more insulated criminals, to focus on the crimes taking place at the simplest levels.

Long-term investigations continue to take place, but the majority of attention is now squarely on the shoulders of those causing trouble at the neighborhood level. Those who annoy and cause concern to the average citizen are now our main targets.

The numbers back up the theory that the philosophy is working. Overall, felony arrests in Troy are up 24 percent. Misdemeanors- 12 percent. Violations- 7 percent. Juvenile arrests- 28 percent. And vehicle and traffic custody arrests are up 66 percent. The City of Troy Police Department made 528 more arrests than they did in 2003.

The Special Operations Unit alone seized 17 illegal guns, 3.4 pounds of cocaine, 225 pounds of marijuana, and 88 packets of heroin.

Our officers are doing an outstanding job. In Rensselaer County, Troy makes up just 52 percent of crime. Yet our officers account for 90 percent of the arrests.

In order for crime to decrease in the Collar City, the number of arrests must first increase. It is the only way, and we are determined to continue on a course to make the City of Troy the safest City it can possibly be.

Cleaner Streets. Safer Streets. This is the foundation for building a City. That is what we are doing in the City of Troy. Yes, we have been around for more than 200 years, but we are rebuilding. We are reinventing ourselves. And our foundation is nearly complete.

Now we must begin to build up. Now, more than any time in recent memory, we have the ability to shape our future.

With a commitment to developing, planning, and completing projects in house, an inspired Planning Department, a Code Enforcement Department focused on improving quality of life, and a City Engineer who actually understands engineering, the third floor of City Hall has reached a point where it is not only able to build our City up, it is anxious to do so.

Currently the Planning and Engineering Departments are undertaking a departmental reorganization of which one of the most exciting elements is the development of professional staff that will have the ability to complete planning and engineering projects in-house, rather than outsourcing to consultants!

What is the upside of this? To name a few examples: project accountability, cost effectiveness, timeliness and a first hand knowledge of the City, its residents, and business owners.

And what about the downside? Well for the City of Troy there is none. But for the consultants who have received tens of thousands of dollars in the past decade? As I said earlier, Troy will no longer be taken advantage of.

With that in mind, I am pleased to announce tonight our first step in redeveloping Riverfront Park. New City engineer Russ Reeves and Deputy Mayor Dan Crawley have begun the design and planning process, and best of all, it has been done in house, by city staff. It is a project that will improve the look of our downtown waterfront and expresses our sincere desire to take full advantage of the access we have in the beautiful Hudson River.

It is an ambitious plan to say the least. However, we will not spend hundreds of thousands of dollars relying on consultants for glamorous plans and attractive diagrams. We will not have meeting after endless meeting to discuss the ability to conduct such an undertaking. We will do much of the work in house. As has become the theme of this administration during its first year, "We're just going to get it done."

The concept of redesigning Riverfront Park came about after the decision was made in July to demolish an ugly and obsolete parking structure. Back in 1998, under a different administration, a consultant was hired, and eventually suggested the garage be torn down and replaced. Six years later that same garage stood, dropping debris on cars. Nothing had been done. Thousands of dollars had been spent for a binder full of information that included all sorts of interesting facts. For instance, the garage was inspected on a daily basis, and the temperature recorded for each day. The demolition suggestion came six years ago. And yet there it stood, in all its rusted glory this summer.

Then one day back in June, under the leadership of Dan Crawley, the decision was made that the garage needed to come down. A month later it was down. Years of planning? No. Thousands of dollars in consulting? Not a chance. The ability to develop a parcel of land the entire City of

Troy can enjoy? Priceless.

In the coming months we will unveil the plan for the new Riverfront Park, and we anxiously look forward to beginning a project that will be a benefit to all Troy residents.

I joked recently about “that vision thing,” and some who feel this administration may lack the vision Troy needs during the next decade. We want to assure everyone that we have a vision, but it is not full of glorious made up facts, countless unneeded diagrams, and endless amounts of false hope. Our vision is a proactive vision that will succeed. We will see projects through to the end, and we will ensure that those projects are in the best interest of all Troy residents and business owners.

The year 2005 brings to us a year of implementation during which we hope to stimulate residential, commercial and economic development through a new streamlined Planning Board, a committed City IDA that will meet more than once every few months, and a marketing philosophy that defines Troy as an attractive alternative to live and work in Tech Valley.

We will market Troy as it should be marketed- emphatically promoting our superior education institutions, a specialized downtown retail district, walk-able historic districts, wonderful and pleasant neighborhoods, and fine cultural institutions.

Among the many projects we will undertake in 2005 are:

- Rezone the entire City. From the streets in Lansingburgh to Congress Street to Campbell’s Avenue, Troy is in sore need of a zoning update. After years of talk and planning, we will ask the Council to address this issue in 2005. Protecting the City from constant inundation of unwelcome ideas must be a priority. For years Troy was sold short. We accepted anything we could get. A used car lot in Lansingburgh? Go ahead! You want a trucking terminal in South Troy? No Problem. Not anymore.
- The Congress/Ferry Street Initiative will have a developer chosen. This project has the ability to bring in more than \$100 million in development. Yes there are stumbling blocks along the road, but cooperation will be the key to success. In 2004, we received requests for proposals from three developers. By this spring, one of those developers will be chosen to pursue this project. It is a daunting task, but one that will stabilize an entire area, provide an exciting entrance into Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and bring in much needed tax dollars to Troy by providing mixed use development of commercial retail offices and housing components.

Congress Street as a whole is ripe for development, all it needs is some tender love and care from the City and residents. Take for example the Minissale family, who recently completed an entire rehabilitation of their restaurant; just a stone throw from Congress Street. Using the City’s 50/50 façade grant program, and the sidewalk replacement program, the Minissale’s have invested in much more than an eatery. They have invested in the Congress Street area. They have invested in a neighborhood. And they have

invested in the City of Troy. We appreciate that in more ways than they know and we thank them for their confidence in our city.

- Last year the City Council passed a measure that re-zoned the South Troy Waterfront. After years and years of planning and discussions, they took the important step and adopted the plan. I commend them for that. That zoning change will be the catalyst in ongoing efforts to clean up brownfields and redevelop the acres of underutilized waterfront land. Later this month, they will have an equally important piece of legislation to consider- the rezoning of the Hoosick Street Corridor. This is our first giant step in 2005.

Posing as the second most heavily traveled road in the Capital District, we have long underutilized Hoosick Street. It is no longer the residential area it once prospered as. Instead this thoroughfare has the potential to be a great generator of tax revenue for years to come. Whether it is hotels, shops, or medical offices, we will soon collect on what we have been sorely missing out on. People commuting to work on a daily basis, skiers heading to Vermont for a weekend, traffic from the Saratoga racing season, and leaf peepers in the fall- all of them drive right through our city. All of these are groups that Troy has not taken advantage of, but with this new zoning in place, we will be one step closer to becoming the place where people stop to get a bite to eat. Or the place where people stop, spend the night, and tour the city. Or perhaps a place where people go when they need something in a hurry. This is what we have to look forward to in our future, rather than just being the place people drive through. That is what we mean when we say people will no longer take advantage of us.

- We will create focus block projects through federally funded community development block grant money that improves City infrastructure and streetscape, and provides rehabilitation money for residential and commercial properties and educational programs.

This year, we will be submitting a new 5-year consolidated plan to Housing and Urban Development relating to housing, emergency shelter and community development. Again, as has been reiterated tonight, in the past, things were done differently. Community Development Block Grant money was traditionally spread throughout the City to various groups for an assortment of purposes with little checking to see if the money was being used correctly.

The new consolidated plan will have the money again being spread across the City, but this time it will go to all of the residents of Troy. This will be a substantial reform to all these programs, and will necessitate a redefining of the philosophy of all agencies involved. The City of Troy wants to see advancements made in long-term social programs rather than just shelters and housing. The new catchwords for CDBG will be self-sufficiency and economic development. CDBG money will be earmarked to stimulate economic growth, historic preservation, leveraging private investment, and most importantly, infrastructure and neighborhood improvements.

Undoubtedly there will be numerous groups in the City of Troy concerned and upset about a possible change in CDBG funding. However, funding from the government should be used to the benefit of all Troy residents, not a select few.

As we make those changes this year, we will also continue to alter the operations inside of City Hall. We have successfully completed the implementation of a new financial management system for expenditures and revenues, which will provide the capability to track all budget appropriations. We will be able to follow all capital projects and federal monies as well. While not a glamorous announcement it is nonetheless important to let residents know that there is accountability in City Hall.

Within the next two weeks we will also complete a consolidation of services inside the Comptroller's Office, where billing from the water department will be moved from its current location in the northern end of the City. This will provide both efficiency and one-stop shopping for Troy residents.

Last year we successfully completed the addition of an in-house payroll system, which saved the City \$20,000, and will save an additional \$30,000 annually from here on out. Achieving savings by doing the job ourselves is vitally important to the future of Troy.

With that we have begun looking for more ways to improve services while saving money. Beginning this year we will attempt to put into operation a parking ticket module that will tie into the Financial Management System for increased control over tickets. Not only will this increase customer service levels, it will also save the City more than a half of a million dollars over the next decade.

We will continue to search for new revenues, but at the same time it is the job of government at the most basic level to cut costs. That has not happened in Troy for a long time. This year, health care, retirement, and contractual raises will cost the City an additional \$3 million. And yet the budget for 2005 only increased by an additional \$1 million. We cut \$2 million in costs out of the budget. That is a staggering number and one I hope is not lost on anyone.

For the first time since 1996, Troy also did not have the advantage of hiding additional debt repayment money to cover costs. During the eight preceding years, the previous administration stockpiled between an additional \$600,000 and \$3 million per year to balance its budgets. They may have been praised in the media, but that practice set the City up for difficult times.

Thanks to the hard work of Comptroller Deborah Witkowski we have turned that situation around. We will no longer sit by and take an increase in costs on the chin. We were told our insurance was going to swell an additional \$40,000 in 2005, so we shopped it around. What was the result of that action? Not only did we not have to pay an increase, we achieved a net savings of \$100,000.

We will be diligent in controlling our costs, consolidating functions, and properly reviewing and critiquing every dollar spent. Dan Crawley and Deborah Witkowski are constantly working together with me to make city government run as efficiently as possible and I thank them for their continued leadership and support. A tax increase in Troy will no longer be a way out of the situation. Instead, it will be an absolute last resort.

The future will continue to bring us challenges. In order to overcome these challenges one must forge partnerships, and last year I promised we would work harder than ever to pursue new ways of contribution from institutions in our City. The Troy Redevelopment Foundation has been the city's ally since 1994. Consisting of Northeast Health, Seton Health, Russell Sage, Emma Willard, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, these five large not-for-profits are prominent stakeholders in our city and they understand their responsibility to the residents of Troy. We have reached out to them and asked for their help. Tonight I am proud to announce that the Troy Redevelopment Foundation has increased their annual allocation to the City of Troy. I am even more excited to announce that with the increase, the Foundation will finance the purchase of a brand new aerial ladder truck that will serve and protect all of the residents of Troy. This ladder truck will provide a great addition to one of the City's strongest assets, the Troy Fire Department.

By strengthening this partnership we will send the message that by working together, nothing is impossible. Tonight Doctor Jim Reid joins us; he is the President of Northeast Health and the Chairman of the Troy Redevelopment Foundation. Thank you Doctor Reid and all of your members for your leadership and your bold symbol of commitment to the people of Troy.

The future of our City, from Lansingburgh to South Troy is brighter than ever. I have said this numerous times over the past 13 months. I say it when I see the accomplishments of our schools. I see it when I walk through downtown and see businesses open up on a weekly basis. I see it during the summer when the Farmers' Market is in full swing outdoors and boats line the shores of the Hudson. I see it when we enjoy the company of thousands of people for the River Street Festival or the Victorian Stroll. And I see it in the eyes of the next generation. My special guests here tonight are Tony Buchanan and Tommy Griswold who recently returned to Troy after serving this great Country in Iraq. Please give them a hearty welcome back.

I respect and appreciate all that Tony and Tommy have done, and through our conversations, I'm sure they are well aware of this. And while it is admirable, it is not why I invited them here tonight. Instead, I invited them because they are two young men who care deeply for the City they grew up in. They love the City of Troy, and they are the future of the City of Troy. If we can inject that attitude into all of the youth in our City- then we will succeed. When we talk about vision- that should be our ultimate vision.

God Bless the City of Troy, Thank you and Good Night.